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Divided We Govern
Coalition Politics in Modern India

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“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but rather under circumstances found, given and transmitted.”

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

“In decisive historical moments, political capacity (which includes organization, will, and ideologies) is necessary to enforce or to change a structural situation. Intellectual evaluation of a given situation and ideas about what is to be done are crucial in politics. The latter is immersed in the shady area between social interests and human creativity. At that level, gambles more than certainty line the paths through which social forces try to maintain or to change social structures. Briefly, in spite of structural ‘determination’, there is room for alternatives in history. Their actualization will depend not just on the basic contradictions between interests, but also on the perception of new ways of turning a historical corner through ‘a passion for the possible.’”

Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto,
Dependency and Development in Latin America

“[The] very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of ‘mistakes’ is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable ... [But the] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a radically voluntaristic understanding of historical possibilities ... if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history ... ‘Betrayal’ is indeed a proper way of understanding social democratic strategies in a world free of objective constraints. But accusations of betrayal are not particularly illuminating in the real world.”

Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*

“What were the arguments used by those opposed to you being Prime Minister?”

... Our argument was: this cannot last five years. If we are there, much more than the others we can make them accept some policies, put them before the country, whatever the limits are. You can’t remove every obstacle, that is not possible: but we could do something for self-reliance, for the countryside, for panchayats, all that we can push through. Anti-poverty programmes: it is there but it does not reach the people. ... But it is a political blunder. It is a historical blunder ... We do not accept many of their policies, they do not accept many of ours. But the minimum programme was there, and we could have implemented it much better than others. Because we have the experience, nothing more, nothing personal.”

Jyoti Basu, former chief minister of West Bengal

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THE PARADOXES OF INDIA'S COALITION POLITICS

Traditionally, scholars of coalition politics in the comparative tradition pose the following questions: What explains the formation of coalitions? What causes them to fall apart? A few ask: How do coalition governments perform in office? A substantial corpus of scholarship addresses these broadly framed questions in a comparative theoretical framework. Conspicuously, the explanations put forward are general, too.¹ Guided by the belief that explanations are nomothetic in principle, leading coalition theorists assert that fine-grained idiographic studies cannot establish valid causal inferences. Ascertaining the latter requires explaining—sometimes even predicting—specific coalition experiments through concepts, theories and methods that are applicable to and account for the largest number of cases. Consequently, most scholars of coalition politics tend to dismiss the value of particular case studies; regard them as useful first steps in the process of forming causal hypotheses and constructing general theories; or employ them only to test the latter.² The search for general political explanations, marked by conceptual parsimony, theoretical ambition and empirical range, remains an ideal.

The study of coalitions in modern Indian politics has developed over two broad phases. The first examined its emergence in the states in the 1960s and 1970s. A number of scholars analyzed these experiments in comparative theoretical perspective.³ However, most offered particular

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recognize that parties contain parliamentary and organizational wings, whose leadership, functions and prerogatives vary, not to mention political factions. Indeed, most concede that internal coalition dynamics consequently remain mysterious.¹⁰ Yet few analyze them directly.¹¹ Some claim that studying the politics of leaders or factions would make wide-ranging analyses of many cases harder. Others point out that mutually binding incentives ensure parties' cohesion, especially in western Europe, which overwhelmingly constitutes their region of focus. In particular, backbench politicians obey the whip at crucial moments of decision to further their personal careers, which party membership normally enhances, while party leaders use the resources and rewards at their disposal to ensure their subordinates' allegiance.¹² The most important decision points, of course, concern the formation and demise of government. Most comparative studies focus on these moments, construing each as independent of prior events or future expectations, in order to test statistically which theories yield greatest leverage. Hence the conceptual assumptions, empirical record and methodological parameters of these inquiries reinforce each other.

To grasp the dynamics of India's coalition politics, in contrast, requires us to investigate the actions of senior party leaders: the high-ranking elected representatives and organizational functionaries of competing electoral formations. There are several reasons for doing so. First, characterizing the main protagonists as unitary party organizations is simply untenable. Many of India's "weakly institutionalized" parties split into rival political factions before, during and after the tenures of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front, "on the basis of feuds or deals of leaders".¹³ In many cases they comprised local personal networks, which individual politicians formed and disbanded expediently. The ancient conception of parties, as factions engaged in plots of intrigue for their own personal benefit, depicts their character far more accurately.¹⁴ Others had proper organizational structures. Yet their leaders, seeking to enhance their personal political power, undermined their integrity and functioning. Indeed, institutional changes and political developments encouraged these proclivities. The passage of the Anti-Defection Law in 1985, designed by the Congress to support party unity, ironically encouraged many factions across the spectrum to create their own parties as vehicles for power.¹⁵ The resulting electoral fragmentation and advent of national coalition politics, which lowered the threshold for acquiring parliamentary influence, deepened these

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that such posts are "fixed prizes" and that parties are fully aware of the various bargains that others are considering,²¹ such theories posit that "minimum winning coalitions" are likely to emerge according to the "size principle": parties will form any coalition able to secure a working parliamentary majority with the fewest possible number of partners (the "strategic principle") in order to maximize their relative share of cabinet power (the "disequilibrium principle").²² Underlying power-maximization theories is a Schumpeterian conception of politics: parties seek power for its own sake.²³

In contrast, policy-realization theories maintain that coalition formation cannot be explained solely by the will to dominate.²⁴ Rather, the contest for power involves substantive concerns, specific policy goals that reflect divergent political ideologies and represent distinct social interests, as pluralists and Marxists would contend. Typically, policy-realization theorists claim that economic policy differences matter the most; that party ideologies differ over how much states should intervene in markets to promote economic stability, growth and redistribution; and that social cleavages reflect the nature and degree of class-based stratification. They argue that parties seek to forge coalitions with other parties that share convergent, or at least indifferent, policy goals through incremental negotiation.²⁵ Hence policy-realization theorists claim that either "minimum connected winning coalitions" or minority governments are likely to emerge.

Lastly, vote-seeking theories contend that since parties contest the ballot in the first instance, the desire to maximize vote share dictates their coalition strategies. Underlying such theories is a Downsian conception of politics: "parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies".²⁶ Parties view elected office as the ultimate reward, a prerequisite for maximizing power or influencing policy, which "in turn implies that each party seeks to receive more votes than any other".²⁷ Indeed, the value of the latter increases in fractured electoral contexts since "the more votes a party wins, the more chance it has to enter a coalition, the more power it receives if it does enter one, and the more individuals in it hold office in the government coalition".²⁸

Strikingly, virtually every observer of India's national coalition politics agrees that constant power struggles define its key dynamics. According to some, the absence of disciplined party organizations with clear ideological differences and relatively stable bases of electoral sup-

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Indeed, many Indian voters support particular party programmes out of concern for their socioeconomic well-being, rather than simplistic representational claims of caste, region or religion. Moreover, inferring social interests from pre-existing divisions ignores how political mobilization shapes the issues at stake in electoral competition.³⁶ Disagreements between the socialists and communists, the two axes of the broader Indian left, exemplify these issues. On the one hand, the socialists historically advocated small-scale rural production, a politics of recognition based on lower-caste identities, and non-alignment in foreign affairs. On the other, the communists traditionally championed rapid state-led industrialization, a politics of redistribution based on classes, and an anti-American foreign policy. Reducing their policy conflicts and ideological debates to the pure mobilizational tools of self-interested political entrepreneurs would be misguided. Finally, several party leaders occasionally took decisions that served a perceived national interest, even at their own expense. Differences over India's nuclear strategy, and terms of bilateral trade and resource sharing in the subcontinent, revealed such motivations at key historical moments. In short, power-based accounts fail to explain why different coalition governments in India have pursued distinct policy agendas with varying success.

That said, grasping substantive inter-party differences requires careful analysis. Policy-realization theories normally make two assumptions: policy goals correspond to specific party ideologies as well as particular social interests. Both are contestable. Ideological differences may not directly orient policy choices. On the one hand, the actual range of choice in an issue-area, such as economic policy, may be limited due to structural constraints in the domestic political economy or international economic order. This was clearly the case in India since the 1990s. On the other hand, a party may appeal to the values and identities of particular social groups, yet fail to advocate policies advancing their economic interests. The politics of dignity pursued by lower-caste parties and militant cultural agenda of Hindu nationalist parties, each of which sometimes made symbolic gains on behalf of their respective constituents yet ignored their wider material interests, illustrate these distinctions. Finally, it is difficult to infer political choices strictly from ideological dispositions because most actors take situational factors into account.³⁷

Indeed, the constituents of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front advocated distinctive programmatic objectives, and their

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[All else equal], the greater the number of negotiating parties, the higher the level of bargaining complexity. But the latter may also be a function of a lack of unity on the part of the organizations involved or the lack of familiarity among the leaders of the relevant parties ... Numerous, disunited, or unfamiliar parties are likely to [have] given rise to information uncertainties among the partners in bargaining ... The more limited their information, the less likely risk-averse party leaders are to gamble on new coalition partners or on moves whose electoral implications are hard to foresee. Thus, in situations of highly imperfect or incomplete information, we may see fewer policy concessions and fewer unorthodox alliances than we might otherwise expect.⁴⁰

Few established democracies rival the bargaining complexity of India's coalition politics. Indeed, the sheer number, fluidity and diversity of parties that oscillate amongst its national coalition governments engender tremendous uncertainty. Contrary to expectation, however, unorthodox alliances are the norm. Moreover, party leaders had to make policy concessions to form many of India's governing coalitions too.

In short, a diversity of purposes animates national coalition politics in India, even though narrow political instincts wreaked havoc all too often. Rather than embracing a "Manichean dualism of soul and body, high-mindedness and the pork barrel,"⁴¹ we need to grasp how a variety of substantive disputes and power struggles shaped the emergence, tenure and demise of India's coalition governments, and the project of building a progressive third force more broadly.

Institutions as rules and incentives, opportunities and constraints

What shapes the opportunities and constraints party leaders face, and the size, character and durability of multiparty governments? Pure coalition theories presume an unconstrained political world. Most scholars realize that intentions rarely determine outcomes, however. Hence they examine the impact of formal political institutions, which generate incentive structures, influence agents' expectations and shape the probability of outcomes.⁴² Three particular institutions draw scrutiny.

First, many analyze the ramifications of different electoral rules on party strategies as well as on the size and degree of polarization within the party system. In general, comparativists argue that electoral rules based on proportional representation (PR), the norm in west European democracies, translate votes into seats in relatively predictable ways. Hence such regimes encourage parties to maximize vote shares. In contrast, single-member simple-plurality (SMSP) systems, in which the

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“surplus” multiparty governments to insure themselves against potential blackmail. In others, policy affinities matter, leading to “minimum connected winning coalitions”. Finally, against theoretical expectation, minority governments are the norm in Scandinavia: the relatively high informational certainty and low political risks characterizing these polities encourage parties to extract policy concessions without joining governments, enabling the latter to endure. In short, for many parties coalition pay-offs depend on the cost of office vis-à-vis their respective votes shares and policy credibility, and whether they believe particular governments will last.⁴⁷ In particular, the distribution of strength amongst parties in parliament and the difficulty of the political bargaining environment determine the probability of different arrangements emerging:

Minority governments are most likely to form when bargaining power is concentrated in the hands of a single party, when the costs of forming free-floating coalitions are low, and when the value that parties place on being in government is not too great. Minimum winning coalitions are most likely to form when the value parties place on being in government is high relative to being in opposition, when uncertainty is low and parties are able to credibly commit to each other, when political decisions are made by simple majority rule, and when bargaining power is neither greatly concentrated nor greatly dispersed. Surplus coalitions are most likely when bargaining is greatly dispersed amongst the various parties in parliament, when political decisions require more than a simple majority in the lower chamber of parliament, and when government membership is neither extremely costly nor extremely valuable.⁴⁸

Thus formal theoretical models predict correctly only 40 per cent of the time.⁴⁹ The second major finding is that random exogenous shocks, especially in governing coalitions that include extreme ideological parties and last beyond their first year, are likely to instigate their demise.⁵⁰ In sum, substantive policy concerns and contextual political factors matter. The significance of uncertainty and contingency at both ends of the coalition game, although rarely emphasized, is quite striking.

Where does India, an asymmetric federal parliamentary democracy with a FPTP electoral regime, stand in light of these comparative findings? The classic expectation regarding FPTP is Duverger's law: its propensity to produce two-party systems and yield single-party majority governments.⁵¹ Winner-take-all elections generate strong incentives for voters to elect a candidate likely to win and, in turn, centripetal pressures for parties to appeal to the median voter by adopting a moderate electoral platform. If no single party can easily capture a plurality of

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the Lok Sabha increased from 19 to 35, while their relative vote share jumped from 26 to 46 per cent.⁵⁷ In short, India's party leaders face the most difficult political bargaining environment of any modern representative democracy.

Given these anomalies, how useful are standard institutional analytics for explaining the vicissitudes of India's national coalition politics? Specifically, why have national multiparty governments become the norm since 1989, despite the persistence of its macro-democratic regime? Given their ubiquitous power struggles, which should encourage "minimum winning coalitions", what explains the fact that virtually every Union government in the post-1989 era lacked a parliamentary majority? And why did national elections in India continue to produce fractured verdicts, despite the instability of particular coalition experiments, until the surprising parliamentary majority won by the BJP in 2014?

We can resolve these puzzles by synthesizing the deft insights of the leading scholars of India's coalition politics. The demise of single-party majority governments at the Centre since 1989 owes much to the complex interaction effects of plurality-rule elections in a progressively regionalized federal parliamentary democracy. These dynamics shape their performance in office too. Its roots lie in the 1950s and 1960s, when New Delhi acceded to growing popular demands to reorganize the federal system into distinct linguistic-cultural zones. Vernacular public spheres developed in many states, leading new parties to employ local idioms of caste, region and language to mobilize historically subordinate classes vis-à-vis the Congress.⁵⁸ The vernacularization of federalism in India gradually encouraged the emergence, under FPTP, of distinct political systems in the states in which two parties or blocs competed for power in the 1960s and 1970s. These were slow burning processes. Yet their ramifications became clearer in the late 1980s. The inability of any single party to maintain a dominant presence in every state created a system of "multiple bipolarities" across the Union and parliamentary fragmentation in New Delhi.⁵⁹ Complex state-level rivalries, combined with a system of government that divided executive authority in the Council of Ministers and required opposition parties to demonstrate a parliamentary majority in order to defeat sitting administrations, locked in pre-electoral allies and enabled successive minority coalition governments to form.⁶⁰ The rise of lower-caste, regional and communist parties in the 1990s vis-à-vis the more elitist,

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the number of parties increased.⁶⁵ Yet specific parties still often suffered from massive negative swings between elections. Notwithstanding 1984, the lead party of every Union government between 1977 and 1996 lost between 15 and 50 per cent of its vote share in the next poll.⁶⁶ Party leaders had good reason, given the persistently high electoral volatility India witnessed after 1989, to feel insecure.

Third, parliamentary cabinet systems are strategically complex. The timing of elections is endogenous—within a customary five-year limit—since the legislature makes and breaks governments. The prime minister commands greater discretion over such matters in single-party majority governments. Power diffuses in multiparty executives, however, to other leaders. And in minority coalition governments, which predominate in India post-1989, every member of the Opposition with an effective parliamentary veto enjoys such influence. The fact that only two minority coalition governments in New Delhi lasted a full parliamentary term to date—both avatars of the United Progressive Alliance—underscores these vulnerabilities.

A paradox emerges. The tripartite logic of India's macro-democratic regime, despite its relative institutional stability, generated political uncertainty after 1989. Party leaders confronted an intensely competitive federal party system where politicians, seeing the outcome simultaneously as close and open, "configure[d] around alternative parties or party blocs"; where small electoral shifts significantly enhanced their bargaining power; and where the stakes were high.⁶⁷ Sustaining a diverse multiparty government in such circumstances, especially a minority governing coalition of diverse state-based parties seeking to create a Third Front, became exceedingly difficult.

Formulas, strategies and tactics of power-sharing

Indeed, these macro-level uncertainties had micro-level dimensions too. The somewhat mechanistic conception of institutions that dominates comparative investigations creates several problems. First, it elides the distinction between rules and incentives. Formal decision rules sometimes produce specific outcomes independently of political agents' decisions. But we cannot assume that political actors will fully respond to the incentives generated by such formulae. India's FPTP regime has constantly encouraged opposition parties to form anti-Congress alliances since independence, producing similar inducements for the

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Indeed, even when party leaders shared convergent goals, their perceptions of how to realize them often diverged. What formulas, strategies and tactics did they employ to realize their diverse aims and wider collective interests?

Few parties rivaled the strategic framework of the communist Left in terms of theoretical articulation.⁷⁶ Historically, its leading political formations embraced two classical Leninist strategies. The "rightest" anti-imperialist line required a coalition of workers, peasants and the petty and national bourgeoisie against feudal institutions and monopoly capitalism. The "leftist" anti-capitalist approach entailed the first three strata in battle against bourgeois nationalism. Over time Indian communist forces entertained a possible third strategy, supporting the progressive bourgeoisie along the lines of "people's democracy" in eastern Europe or "new democracy" in the People's Republic of China. Strategy concerned winning the war among classes. Hence choosing a strategic line required settling larger questions: the historical stage of capitalist development in India, the roles of different social classes in particular stages and consequently the aim of the proletariat vis-à-vis other strata. Whether the communists allied with non-communist parties through a united-front-from-above, or infiltrated the latter through a united-front-from-below, was a matter of tactics for its political organizations. Crucially, the movement cast these choices in formulaic terms, articulated well by Mao Tse-Tung: "The task of the science of strategy is to study those *laws* for directing a war that govern a war situation as a whole. The task of ... the science of tactics is to study those *laws* for directing a war that govern a particular situation".⁷⁷

Suffice to say, most parties failed to develop such an elaborate theoretical discourse. But questions of strategy and tactics consumed them nonetheless. Debates over whether to share power, with whom and to what extent, and how often led to real schisms. The main protagonists had to address these issues at two related junctures. First, party leaders had to coordinate their electoral strategies. Joint election manifestoes and common programmes allowed them to strike compromises amenable to their respective bases and steer government policy. Collective agreements imparted a measure of coherence to several multiparty alliances, highlighted their distinctive agenda and set red lines vis-à-vis more contested issues. The absence of such pacts and failure to adhere to explicitly stated parameters exacerbated latent conflicts, as comparativists find elsewhere.⁷⁸ Of course, such pacts could not

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in large multiparty governments is difficult: the problems of enforcing collegial responsibility are multiplied when the loyalties of ministers are diverse. The sheer number of parties in India's national coalition governments intensifies the challenge. Moreover, at different junctures various parties supported a parliamentary coalition but refused to participate in government. With the exception of the Janata Party and second administration of the National Democratic Alliance, every governing coalition in New Delhi was a minority, forced to rely on outside support. Hence they had to concoct power-sharing formulas and conflict resolution mechanisms to facilitate collective decision-making, adjudicate competing demands and make binding claims.

Many relied on ad hoc devices: private bilateral meetings between key party officials. Others were regular yet informal: weekly political dinners at the prime minister's residence. Over time informal political institutions evolved, however, as often happens when pre-existing rules are inadequate.⁸³ The most important was the coordination committee, which acted as a safety valve as well as an integrative mechanism, providing a forum for parties to engage problems without the glare of media or parliament. At their best, it helped party leaders to "learn to play the game", recognizing "the right [of all constituents] to participate and ... be consulted in the decision-making process".⁸⁴ Crucially, coordination committees allowed outside supporters to engage with parties in government. Indeed, the United Front was the first to establish such a forum, with a higher-level steering committee too, in order to accommodate the CPI(M), which helped to construct the coalition and draft its common minimum programme but refused government participation. In several governments, disagreements over the status and functioning of the coordination committee vis-à-vis the Union cabinet hampered political consensus, deepened partisan divisions and blurred the locus of responsibility. Both the United Front and United Progressive Alliance encountered such difficulties vis-à-vis the CPI(M). Nevertheless, the fact every national coalition government in India after 1996 set up such a body testified to its relative utility and political necessity.

The necessity and difficulty of exercising political judgment

In sum, senior party leaders deeply influenced the rise, performance and fall of different coalition experiments, given their relative autonomy, the

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That said, five intellectual traits encourage good political judgment. First, it requires political actors to focus on particulars as opposed to generalizations or universals, to possess deep contextual knowledge of the situation they face in order to maximize the chances of success. The relevant context may differ: local power relations, the structure of national politics, an historical epoch. Moreover, judgment always entails relating particulars to universals, which requires the "ability to determine which ... theories abstract from crucial aspects of the situation".⁹¹

Second, good political judgment is pragmatic. Skilful actors exhibit a grasp of "what will work": to see a political situation "in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you".⁹² It requires actors to possess a sense of timing, "to [grasp] opportunities that will not present themselves again",⁹³ foreseeing not simply what will happen but what will seem good to powerful others that matter.⁹⁴

Third, good political judgment demands a synthetic form of causal understanding, "a capacity for taking in the total pattern of a human situation, of the way in which things hang together".⁹⁵ Realists view politics as complex and probabilistic: complex since the forces shaping it may be heterogeneous, reciprocal or contingent over time;⁹⁶ probabilistic because what is possible in principle, in a world that might yet exist, may not be at specific moments. Indeed, grasping the precise causal relations that define particular historical contexts frequently involves facing the contradictions of the world squarely.⁹⁷

Fourth, good political judgment involves strategic reasoning. Actors have to consider the intentions, capacities and actions of others with partial knowledge. They may face brute factual uncertainty about states of affairs; higher-order uncertainty about the necessity and cost of resolving such factual uncertainty; indecision over what to do because of asymmetric information or the existence of multiple plausible choices; and inadequate causal understanding of how the political world operates.⁹⁸ Thus, strictly speaking, to judge is not to calculate.

Finally, good political judgment requires actors to possess a degree of detachment. On the one hand, they must have a passion for a cause. A purely instrumental politician, devoid of any substantive ends, would be a man without a soul. On the other, they must demonstrate an ethic of responsibility for the consequences of their actions, regardless of their intentions. Hence the ability to "maintain a distance from things and events" is crucial.⁹⁹

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attempts to explain the formation and collapse of coalitions using non-cooperative game theory restrict their models to three contesting parties.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, the number and turnover of players and diversity and fluidity of interests in successive multiparty governments in India, not to mention their frequent minority parliamentary status, makes it hard to model their behavior without indeterminate results.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, rational choice theories confront inherent difficulties in grasping political mistakes, let alone explaining their causes or ramifications. In principle, models of rationality accentuate the imperative of choice, not least the dilemma facing socialists in west European democracies in the twentieth century:

[The] very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of "mistakes" is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable.... [the] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a radically voluntaristic understanding of historical possibilities ... [but] if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history... "Betrayal" is indeed a proper way of understanding social democratic strategies in a world free of objective constraints. But accusations of betrayal are not particularly illuminating in the real world.¹⁰⁹

Yet rational choice explanations habitually insist that "what the agent did was the best or most effective way of pursuing her purposes. And this entails establishing the embedded normative assertion [of complete rationality]".¹¹⁰ Two problems arise. As behavioral economists show, actors often make irrational choices, sometimes quite systematically.¹¹¹ Moreover, many rationalist accounts paradoxically claim that actors could not have chosen otherwise:

Was the alternative possible? ... Socialists had no choice: they had to struggle for political power because any other movement for socialism would have been stamped out by force and they had to utilize the opportunities offered by participation to improve the immediate conditions of workers because otherwise they would not have gained support among them. They had to struggle for power and they were lucky enough to be able to do it under democratic conditions. Everything else was pretty much a consequence.¹¹²

The specter of inevitability robs the notion of choice of meaning; indeed, it disappears. So does a great deal else too—suspense, luck and change—animating political life.¹¹³ All that remains to be explained are rational mistakes.

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had foreseen nor could have. We can only resolve these questions through rigorous process tracing, evaluating plausible counterfactuals in light of general theoretical principles and specific historical knowledge, a task that causal narratives generally face.¹¹⁹

Lastly, since good political judgment demands contextual reasoning, wider theoretical inferences are harder to draw. For rational choice theorists, “[what] makes a tale compelling is that the causal mechanisms it identifies are plausible ... [which involves] demonstrating their generalizability to other contexts ...”.¹²⁰ As a result, “rationalists are almost always willing to sacrifice nuance for generalizability, detail for logic, a forfeiture most other comparativists would decline”.¹²¹ The belief that universal causal relations govern the world justifies the claim that valid arguments must be general in scope. Conceptual parsimony and theoretical ambition produce maximum explanatory leverage.

Fortunately, narratives provide a very useful technique for addressing some of these problems. If done well, they supply “diverse forms of internal evidence” that mitigate selection bias.¹²² A narrative offers a critical plausibility test to examine the presuppositions underlying competing theories, uncover new facts and develop critical redescriptions of previously studied phenomena.¹²³ Quantitatively-oriented methodologists agree that valid causal explanations require good descriptive inference.¹²⁴ But describing events accurately, whether they suggest larger patterns or not, is necessary too.

In addition, narratives facilitate process-tracing, linking causes, mechanisms and effects and generating insights into possible auxiliary outcomes.¹²⁵ Such processes take various forms: linear isolated mechanisms that generate constant effects; the concatenation of actors, decisions and structures that produce complex causal chains; path dependent processes in which early contingent events mold historical outcomes over the *longue durée*, to name a few. “The very act of producing an account [of the past] ... virtually requires an often counterfactual neatness and coherence ... with an air of inevitability being given to an act that may have been highly contingent.”¹²⁶ Uncovering the complex causal chains that may have produced larger outcomes minimizes such illusions.

Sources and methods

Ultimately, a compelling narrative demands good detective work, resting on the quality of observations and inference.¹²⁷ Accordingly, this

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motives simply via theory, as most rationalist accounts do, skirts these challenges while raising problems of its own.¹³¹ By granting confidentiality to key protagonists, moreover, we arguably increase their likelihood of imparting genuine observations. Lastly, no Archimedean vantage exists. We simply have to assess “diverse, complex and sometimes conflicting” claims, judging their credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness according to the best practices of empirical verification.¹³²

Ultimately, recognizing the role of judgment in politics carries a significant implication. It requires us to exercise good political judgment ourselves: to ask what it was possible for the actors we study, in the circumstances in which they found themselves, to reasonably do, analyzing the foreseeable consequences of different political decisions by reconstructing the context of action in time, not as spectators after the fact, as faithfully as we can.¹³³ If done well, our explanations should resist temptations of abstract moralizing and easy historical judgment as well as tales of necessity and flights of fancy, demonstrating the possibilities and constraints surrounding real political events as they actually happened.